

Good News! Light in the Darkness
Matt 4:12-17, Eph 5:8-10

Well friends, as the New Year starts - one of the things that we can look forward to is that the days are starting to get longer! Now I don't know about you... but I'm not a big fan of short days and long nights.

In the summer I can be up early and get going with my day no problem... but in December and early January when its still dark out at 8am in the morning – I just want to hit the snooze button and go back to bed.

And in the afternoon when it gets dark at 4pm, that affects me too – it feels like its 8:30pm instead. You haven't even started your evening but the darkness just makes you sort of start to shut down... and you start thinking about turning in for the evening.

In the summer time when it's light outside I'm so much more productive. I can get up early... work all day and then go home and there's still three or four hours of daylight left.

I can easily keep on working and being productive through the evening – it's wonderful... but when it gets dark out early – it's tough to keep on going.

And it's not just our productivity that is affected – the lack of light affects our emotional state as well. Many people suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder and they feel depressed and unhappy during the winter because they are not getting enough sunlight.

So as we start the New Year, we can look forward to the days getting longer and having more daylight... and that's good news for our productivity and for those who are S.A.D. More light is good news...

And I think it's important that we start the New Year looking for some good news, because looking back over 2013 there's certainly been enough bad news – floods, ice storms, train derailments, political scandal...

And I know that for a number of us – 2013 was a rather difficult year on a personal level as well – and I want to commend those of you who asked our prayer team to pray for you during those times.

So as we leave 2013 behind and move into 2014 and we wish everyone a happy and prosperous New Year - we need some good news, some solid good news to give us some hope – a bit of assurance that 2014 could be a better year, could be the kind of year that we wish for people... for reasons other than positivity or wishful thinking or talking big...

And speaking of talking big, I've come across some New Year's wishes about prosperity and success that are just way over the top.

I mean I would be scared to say them to you – because if you don't have the best year of your life and win the lottery or something - you are going to come back and sue me for false advertising...

So instead of grandiose wishes, which likely won't live up to their hype – I want to offer us good news instead, like the simple but significant good news that we can look forward to more daylight in the coming months... and the simple but significant statement in Mathew 4:16 that *“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light!”*

That's Good news! It sounds like good news.

You don't have to know anything about the background information, the context in scripture, the original words Greek, or anything else to know that this sounds like good news.

People who are sitting in darkness have seen a great light!

We just know from our ordinary everyday experience that going from darkness to light is full of hope, full of promise; full of relief...

No one likes to stumble around in the darkness, bumping into things...

And if you had plans to do something – work, play, read, or write; you can't do that in the dark when you can't see what you're doing...

We get lost in the dark; the things we are afraid of lurk in the dark, darkness immobilizes us...

So when we hear that *"the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light"* we hear good news.

And the good news is that this good news gets even better.

If we explore the context in the scripture and we look the background information and the original Greek words and so on... we will become enlightened about what great this light actually is and what it means for us!

So to start, this little bit of good news comes to us from Isaiah 9:2, and Mathew is quoting it to explain why Jesus has withdrawn to Capernaum when John the Baptist is put in prison.

Matthew writes *"Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light; on those sitting in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."* (vs.15-16)

So - a quick lesson in bible geography; The Land of Zebulun and Naphtali are located north of where the Jordan River meets the Sea of Galilee. That's why Matthew says "by way of the sea, beyond the Jordan. This is the land what was given to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali when Israel entered the Promised Land.

Now, fast forward through the rest of the Old Testament up to the time of Jesus and the map of Israel has changed considerably.

Zebulun and Naphtali and the area west of the Sea of Galilee have become a puppet kingdom of the Roman Empire, ruled by King Herod Antipas.

So the region of Galilee – once set-apart as exclusive territory for some of God’s Covenant People - has now become a melting pot for people of all backgrounds and religions under foreign rule - it is Galilee of the Gentiles, as Mathew calls it.

And Matthew is saying that the people of this region have seen a great light because Jesus officially begins his ministry there – specifically in the town of Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

So this is where the background information helps us to see how this good news gets better.

The fact that Jesus starts his ministry as the long awaited, much anticipated Messiah in the remote northern regions where the Gentiles and Jews mixed freely and not in Jerusalem is good news.

Because prior to Jesus’ ministry to see the light of God you had to physically go to Jerusalem, to pray at the Temple, to be instructed on how to observe the laws of the Mosaic Covenant.

For example in King Solomon’s dedication prayer for the Temple he says *“As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land...—when they come and pray toward this temple...”* (2 Chron 6:32)

Before Jesus ministry – to see the light of God you had to go to Jerusalem.

Now don’t get me wrong, the Mosaic Covenant and the Temple in Jerusalem were good news when they first started – but by the time Jesus arrived, the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law had got it so backwards and twisted up that it wasn’t good news anymore – it was a legalistic burden, and the foreigners were not welcomed anymore either...

In fact the place where Gentiles could come and pray in the Temple courts had been appropriated for currency exchange and the sale of livestock for Jewish sacrifices.

So instead of setting himself up in Jerusalem – and expecting those who were far away - not only geographically but also religiously – to come to him... Jesus starts his ministry among them – it is in Galilee where Jesus proclaims *“repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!”* (vs. 17)

The people sitting in darkness have seen a great light!

So friends, this news is getting better because the light is drawing near to the people in darkness; the light is seeking them out.

And this background information helps us to distinguish that the light which the people see is not the political and religious significance of Jerusalem; with its Temple worship and sacrifice and observance of all the laws – it is the Holy Spirit empowered ministry of Jesus the Messiah.

And as Jesus calls the disciples, performs healings and miracles, casts out demons and teaches the people with authority, we see the great light driving back the spiritual darkness which has oppressed them.

So we learn that this great Light which the people have seen is the Kingdom of Heaven, and it is driving back the Kingdom of Darkness! Amen!

I told you that the good news is that this good news just keeps on getting better and better...

And here’s some more good news - it’s not just the people in Galilee who saw a great light when Jesus started to minister among them – we have seen it too!

Because Jesus himself said *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* (John 8:12)

So... the people sitting in darkness in the West Side of Calgary, in Springbank Hill and the surrounding communities have also seen a great light!

We can see in the scriptures that Jesus healed people, cast out demons, did miracles and called people to turn away from the darkness and embrace the light of the Kingdom of Heaven.

One of the amazing things about light is how it can travel undiminished across time, for example when you see a star - the light from that star has taken tens of thousands of years to reach us but it still shines as brightly as it did when it left that star.

And so the good news of Jesus Christ - the light of Jesus Christ's ministry as the Messiah - may have taken two thousand or so years to reach us but it has not diminished it in any way over that time.

Friends the good news is the name of Jesus Christ still has power.

It has the power to forgive your sins!

Whatever you have done wrong – you can confess it to God and ask for forgiveness in the name of Jesus – and you will be forgiven of it. It will not be held against you by God, and it can't be used against by Satan – because it is forgiven through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross.

And the name of Jesus still has power to heal, to do miracles, to drive out demons and drive back the kingdom of darkness.

Now I was thinking it might be good to find a bunch of inspirational examples of people who experienced having their sins forgiven, who were healed, or experienced a miracle or deliverance etc... and share them with you.

But as wonderful as that it is to hear that kind of good news which has taken place in the lives of people you probably don't know... I think it is more beneficial to us to that would experience the power of the name of Jesus personally.

So that next year as we are reflecting on 2014 we'll be talking about how this was the year where we personally experienced forgiveness for our sins in Jesus name, where we personally experienced healing, miracles, deliverance and more of the Kingdom of Heaven in our lives and in our community in Jesus name.

It strikes me that much of what people wish each other on New Year's, much of what people resolve to do in the coming year has to do with the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven coming about in their lives.

Listen carefully to these New Year's wishes...

"Another fresh new year is here, another year to live, to banish worry doubt and fear, to love and laugh and give"

Or this one;

"For everybody in the world, whatever color their skin may be, whatever their religion may be, whatever their situation may be, good health, lots of love, of possibilities and peace."

What about this one;

"May this new year find you healthier and happier, peaceful, content, satisfied, looking forward to fresh, revitalizing interests, a variety of pleasures, interesting new people, material and personal successes to make this new year the best one yet."

And don't forget the all resolutions that get made to eat right, exercise more, lose weight, stop smoking, stop drinking, spend less save more, and so on....

Friends - aren't these resolutions and wishes just describing what happens when people who are sitting in darkness see a great light?

Don't they simply describe what can happen when the Kingdom of Heaven draws near to us and we experience the power in the name of Jesus and are enabled to repent and turn away from darkness and live in the light?

That's why all we need as we start the New Year is the good news which says *"The people sitting in darkness have seen a great light!"*

This good news contains the power to transform us from darkness to light, that's the final way in which this good news gets better and its how it applies to us.

The Apostle Paul talks about this in his letter to the Ephesians, and He writes *"For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light"* (vs. 5:8)

In other words the essence of who we were; used to be totally and completely affected by sin – darkness, but since God became a human being in Jesus Christ and was totally and

completely unaffected by sin – through our relationship with Christ that has become is our reality as well.

So we live vicariously through Christ – we live as children of the light. Do you grasp the mechanics of how that works?

Good – but the problem is that simply understanding it is not how you experience it. Just knowing that we are made sinless in Christ does very little to help us experience any transformation from our sin in our day to day lives.

To experience transformation we need to expose the fruitless deeds of darkness that linger in us to the light of Christ as Paul instructs us to do in vs. 11 *"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them."*

What happens next is described in vs. 13 *"everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light."*

Exposing our fruitless deeds of darkness is being honest about how we are still affected by sin as Christians. It's confessing our sins to each other and to Christ, asking for forgiveness in Jesus name...

Exposing everything to the light is asking the Holy Spirit to reveal hurts in us that need to be healed, relationships which need to be made right, lies we've believed that need to be replaced with the truth...

When we expose these areas that we usually try to keep hidden in the dark to the light of Christ transformation happens to them – to us...

Just like the moon is a chunk of lifeless rock that gives no light of its own, when the light of the sun hits it is transformed into a light – reflecting the light of day into the night.

Friends may this be the year when the good news that *“those who are sitting in darkness have seen a great light”* means that the light of Christ shines on our lingering darkness...

whatever those dark shadows may be; bitterness, unforgiveness, anger, hurt, lust, pride...

Not to embarrass us, but to transform us, to undo the ways in which the residue of sin still twists and warps us and to make us whole again – making what we wish for each New Year a reality in our lives.

So friends, as 2014 begins I said that we can look forward to more light – and yes the days are getting longer – but I also know that here at Valleyview the light of Christ is growing stronger!

So hear the good news – the people sitting in darkness have seen a great light! Amen.